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Current Support Brief

NORTH VIETNAM RECONSTRUCTS THE RAIL LINE
TOWARD SOUTH VIETNAM



CIA/RR CB 64-29

April 1964

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Office of Research and Reports

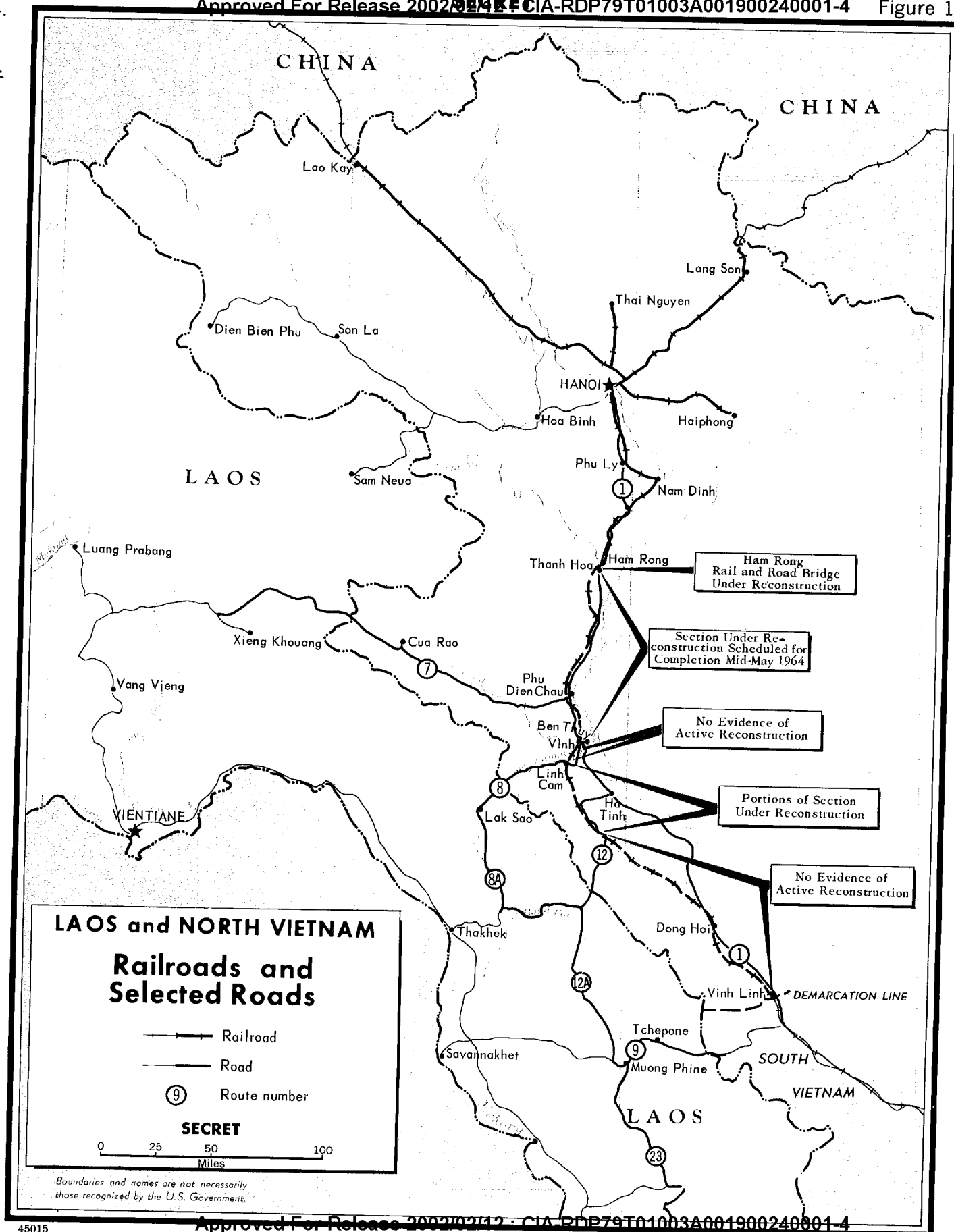
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NORTH VIETNAM RECONSTRUCTS THE RAIL LINE
TOWARD SOUTH VIETNAM

Supplied with material and technical aid from Communist China, the North Vietnamese are making steady progress in reconstructing the rail line leading south to Vinh, the major staging area for the shipment of supplies on routes 7, 8, and 12 to Laos and through Laos to South Vietnam (see the map, Figure 1). Completion of the line to Vinh, scheduled for May 1964, and expansion of the road capacities in Laos will increase significantly Communist military capabilities in southern Indochina. The North Vietnamese also have started initial reconstruction of the rail line leading south from Vinh toward South Vietnam, but there is no indication that the line will be extended entirely to the 17th parallel at the present time. The intention of the North Vietnamese may be to extend the line only as far as the junction with route 12, approximately 90 kilometers (km) below Vinh and 190 km from the 17th parallel.

1. Rail Line to Vinh

a. Progress of Reconstruction

Until 1961 the North Vietnamese did little to rebuild the 150-km section of meter-gauge rail line leading south from Ham Rong to Vinh that was destroyed during the French-Indochinese War, but concentrated their efforts instead on rebuilding the lines in the northern part of the country that radiate from Hanoi to the port of Haiphong, to the Chinese border, and to the Thai Nguyen Iron and Steel Combine. In early 1961, however, the Chinese Communists agreed to help North Vietnam reconstruct the Ham Rong Bridge, 160 meters long and 17 meters wide,* near Thanh Hoa -- the major obstacle to the extension of the line southward to Vinh. The Chinese have provided technicians, heavy work barges, and steel construction materials, and by March 1964 the bridge had reached an advanced stage of construction -- the approaches, the abutments, and the center pier were completed, and half of the steel superstructure was in place (see the photograph, Figure 2). Manual labor for construction of the roadbed below the Ham Rong Bridge is being performed by "thousands" of members of the Lao Dong Youth Federation under the provocative slogan of "for our South Vietnamese blood brothers." Photography [REDACTED] indicated that track had been laid almost to the airfield just north of Vinh, and, barring unforeseen problems in construction of the Ham Rong Bridge, the line to Vinh and to the port of Ben Thuy 3 km below Vinh on the Song Ca probably could be completed in May 1964.

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* This width is sufficient to accommodate a standard-gauge rail line, a roadway, and walkways on either side.

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b. Significance of Reconstruction

There is no immediate economic justification for reconstructing the rail line south of Ham Rong, nor is there, at the present low level of support to the insurgents in Laos and South Vietnam, any military justification. Rehabilitation of the line to Vinh and expansion of road capacities in Laos, however, will increase significantly Communist military capabilities in southern Indochina. Vinh is the major staging area for the movement of men and materiel to central and southern Laos and to South Vietnam through Laos. At the present time, most supplies destined for central and southern Laos probably are transported by rail from Hanoi to Ham Rong and then by truck on route 1 to Vinh. A substantial increase in the amount of supplies delivered to Vinh would require additional trucks, spare parts, and fuel, all of which are scarce in North Vietnam. Large shipments by coastal water are hindered by the small size of the coastal fleet and the limited capacity of the port of Ben Thuy. Rail service to Vinh, therefore, will increase the supply capability while decreasing delivery time. Trucks that are now being used north of Vinh will be available for use in transporting supplies on routes 7, 8, and 12 into Laos. Although the present level of traffic on these roads is not known, it is believed to be well below the estimated road capacities as shown in the table. Moreover, the capacities of these roads can be increased with additional construction and constant maintenance. Work is currently underway on routes 7 and 12, the major supply routes to the Plaine des Jarres and to southern Laos, respectively.

Estimated Capacities of Selected Roads in Laos a/
March 1964

<u>Route Number</u>	<u>General Road Description</u>	<u>Metric Tons per Day</u>	
		<u>Dry Season</u>	<u>Rainy Season</u>
7	Limited all-weather road	360 to 450	50 to 90
8	Fair-weather road	270	Negl.
12	Limited all-weather road	450 to 540	90

a. Estimates indicate sustained forward capacity and allow for the return of empty trucks. The estimate of capacity for any road, however, should not be regarded as a precise statement of its carrying ability but only as an order of magnitude.

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2. Rail Line South of Vinh

The North Vietnamese have not announced publicly their intention to reconstruct the 280-km meter-gauge section of the rail line from Vinh to the 17th parallel, but some work has started on parts of this line. The East Germans recently stated, perhaps in violation of North Vietnamese security, that work had started below Vinh. Aerial photography reveals that reconstruction work is in a preliminary stage, starting at a point approximately 20 km below Vinh and continuing intermittently for a distance of about 40 km along a section where the line cuts inland away from the coast. The roadbed is being restored and some of the smaller bridges are being rebuilt, but no work has yet started on any of the large bridges that were destroyed during the French-Indochinese War (see the photograph, Figure 3) -- including the two large bridges directly southwest of Vinh over the Song Ca and the Song Giang.

In contrast to the Ham Rong - Vinh section, the line from Vinh to the 17th parallel has at least nine major bridges that are out, ranging from 100 to 425 meters in length. It has taken the North Vietnamese more than 3 years to reconstruct the Ham Rong Bridge, and a comparable period of time would be required to rebuild a number of the larger bridges below Vinh. It is unlikely, therefore, that the line could be extended all the way to the 17th parallel much before 1967, even with a stepped-up construction effort.

The North Vietnamese, however, may intend to rehabilitate the rail line only as far south as route 12 at the present time. The line now is under construction near the area where route 12 turns west toward the Laotian border, about 90 km south of Vinh, but no work has been observed below this area. In order to extend rail-freight service to route 12 without rebuilding the two large bridges directly southwest of Vinh, a rail ferry would be required. The total distance by ferry from the port of Ben Thuy up the Song Giang to the southern section of the rail line is about 20 km. The water depth in this area is at least 2.5 meters at low water, a depth sufficient for the use of rail ferries.

Analysts:

Coord:

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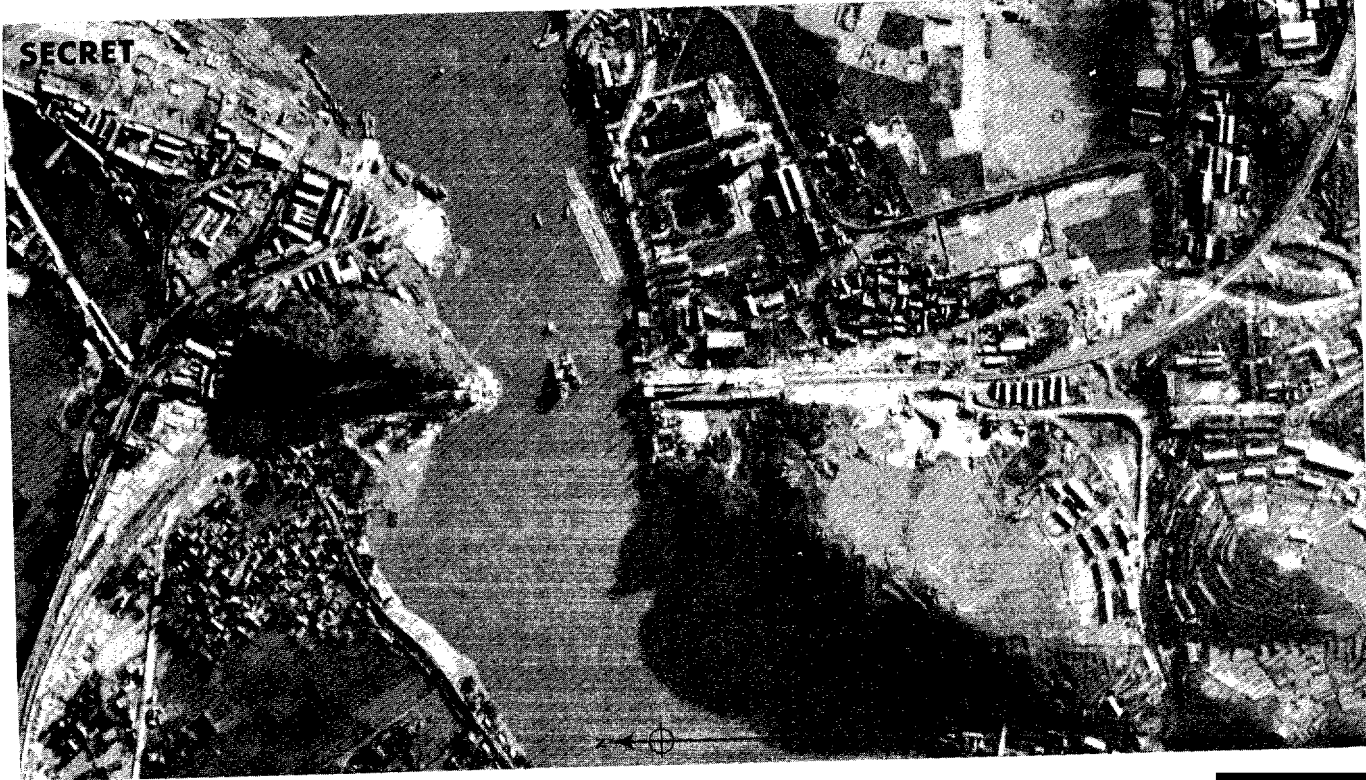
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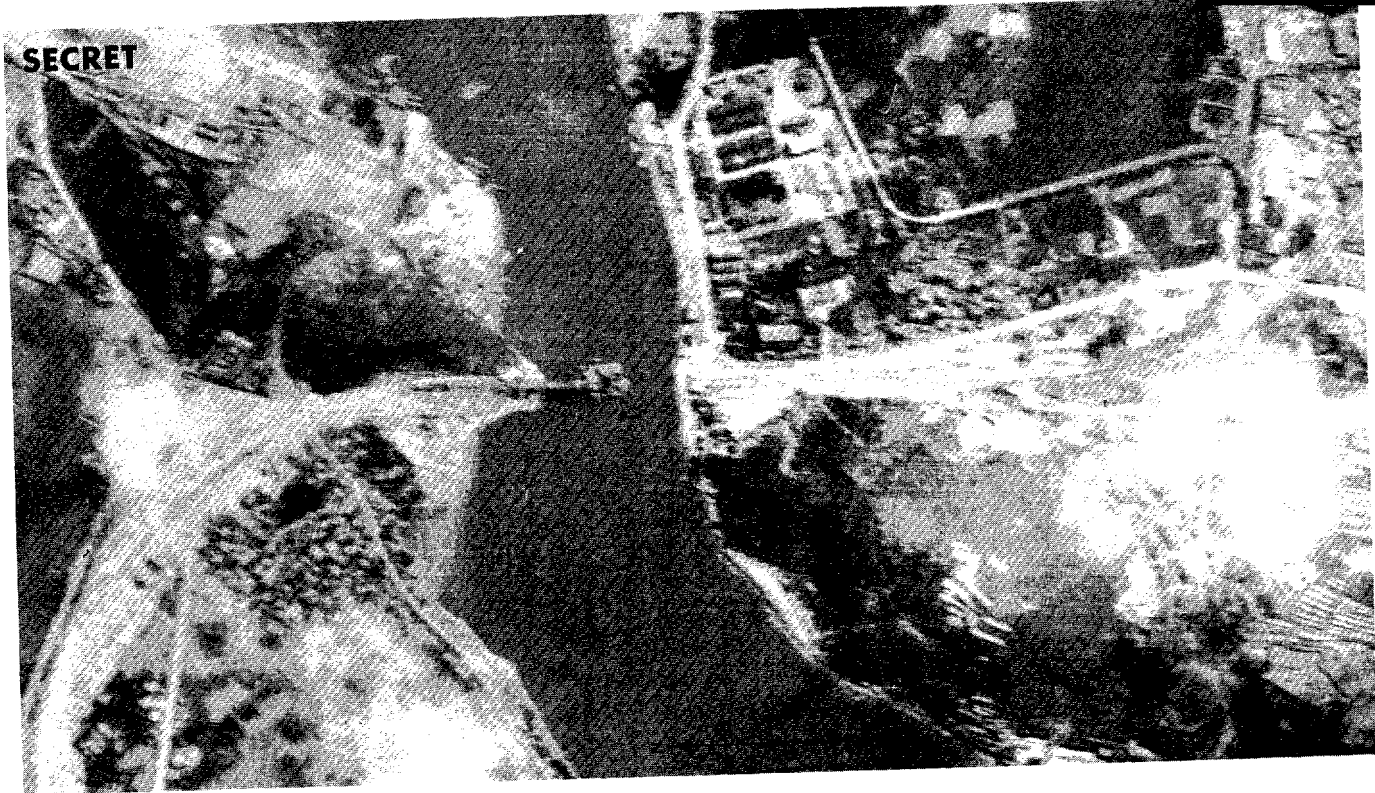
Figure 2

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Ham Rong Bridge Under Construction

Note that [REDACTED] the first span linking the north bank of the Song Ma to the center pier has been completed.

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Example of a Rail Bridge Destroyed During the French-Indochinese War
Note the pieces of superstructure in the water. This bridge is located
17 kilometers south of Dong Hoi, at 17°19' N x 106°37' E.

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15 May 1964

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Attachments:

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